R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 014 589 VT 003 752

WHAT ABOUT WOMEN'S ABSENTEEISM AND LABOR TURNOVER.
WOMENS BUREAU, WASHINGTON, D.C. (DEPT. OF LABOR)
REPORT NUMBER BOL-WB-66-143 PUB DATE 66
EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.36 7P.

DESCRIPTORS- SEX (CHARACTERISTICS), *WORKING WOMEN, *ABSENTEEISM, *JOB TENURE,

STATISTICS ON ABSENTEEISM AND LABOR TURNOVER ARE REVIEWED TO DETERMINE IF GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT LABOR COSTS, BASED ON SEX DIFFERENCES, ARE LEGITIMATE. IN 1963, 5.4 AND 5.6 DAYS WORKTIME WERE LOST BY WOMEN AND MEN RESPECTIVELY. DURING AN AVERAGE WEEK IN 1964, 2.7 PERCENT OF THE MEN AND 3.1 PERCENT OF THE WOMEN WORKERS WERE ABSENT FROM WORK BECAUSE OF ILLNESS. WOMEN'S ILLNESSES ARE MORE ACUTE BUT OF SHORTER DURATION. MEN LOST 3.1 DAYS PER PERSON FOR CHRONIC ILLNESSES, COMPARED WITH 2.6 DAYS FOR WOMEN. NET DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN LEAVING JOBS ARE SMALL. IN 1961, 11 PERCENT OF MEN AND 8.6 PERCENT OF THE WOMEN WORKERS CHANGED JOBS ONCE OR MORE. FROM 1950-55, FACTORY WORKERS HAD A QUIT RATE OF 24 PER 1,000 WOMEN AND 17 PER 1,000 MEN EMPLOYEES. CONTINUOUS EMPLOYMENT AT THE CURRENT JOB AVERAGED 3 YEARS FOR WOMEN AND 5.7 YEARS FOR MEN IN 1963. THE HIGHER TURNOVER RATE FOR WOMEN CAN BE EXPLAINED BY THE RELATIVELY LARGER PROPORTION OF WOMEN THAN MEN UNDER 25 YEARS OF AGE, IN LOWER GRADE CLERICAL JOBS, AND WITH FEWER YEARS OF FEDERAL SERVICE--ALL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGH TURNOVER. DIFFERENCES IN ABSENTEEISM, AND TURNOVER RATE NARROWED WHEN COMPARISONS WERE MADE OF MEN AND WOMEN WITH SIMILAR OCCUPATIONAL LEVELS, SALARIES, AGES, AND YEARS OF SERVICE. GENERALIZATIONS ON WORK PERFORMANCE BASED ON SKILL LEVEL OF THE JOB, AGE OF THE WORKER, LENGTH OF SERVICE WITH THE EMPLOYER, AND WORKER'S RECORD OF JOB STABILITY ARE MORE LEGITIMATE THAN THOSE BASED ON WHETHER THE WORKER IS A MAN OR A WOMEN. (FP)

ED014589

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OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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WHAT ABOUT WOMEN'S ABSENTEEISM AND LABOR TURNOVER?

Broad generalizations about the comparative labor costs of men and women workers are often incorrect because they point to the sex of the worker as the major determining factor in situations where numerous other factors have much more influence.

A careful analysis of various impartially collected statistics on absenteeism and labor turnover indicates that the skill level of the job, the age of the worker, the worker's length of service with the employer, and the worker's record of job stability--all give much better clues to an understanding of differences in work performance than does the mere fact that the worker is a man or a woman.

Before examining studies which take into consideration comparable characteristics of workers, however, it is pertinent to cite the overall averages of data compiled by official or independent agencies. These show that net differences in the work performance of men and women are much smaller than frequently suggested.

Overall Averages of Absenteeism

A Public Health Service study (1) of worktime lost by persons 17 years of age and over because of illness or injury shows an average of 5.4 days lost by women but 5.6 days lost by men during the survey year, July 1963-June 1964. A general decline in acute illnesses caused the more favorable rate for women than men, a reversal from the July 1961-June 1962 survey, when time lost averaged 5.8 days for women and 5.7 days for men.

NOTE: References are listed on page 7.

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics, on the basis of unpublished data collected in the monthly survey of the labor force, can calculate the incidence of illness but not its duration. During an average week in 1964, 2.7 percent of men workers and 3.1 percent of women workers were absent from work because of illness.

Other analyses have indicated that women's illnesses usually keep them away from work for shorter periods than do men's illnesses. The Health Information Foundation of The University of Chicago studied the total loss to the American economy from work absences that occur because of illness or injury. This study (2), made between July 1959 and June 1960, indicates that the total financial loss caused by women's absences is not very different from that caused by men's.

Concerning "acute conditions" of illness among employed persons, the Health Information Foundation report states:

> "For the one-year period, acute conditions were responsible for approximately 151 million work-loss days, or 3.4 days per person, by men, and 90 million, or 4 days per person, by women. Higher absenteeism for women can be explained by the higher incidence of acute conditions among currently-employed women. About 1.5 acute conditions per person were reported among men workers and 1.7 per person among women. In terms of the loss in wages and salaries, the higher absenteeism for women than for men reduced the magnitude of loss because men generally had higher earnings than women."

Concerning work absences due to "chronic conditions," the report continued:

> "For the one-year period, July 1959 through June 1960, 137 million days, or 3.1 days per person, were lost from work by men and 58.6 million days, or 2.6 days per person, by women. In contrast to absenteeism due to acute conditions, the rate is higher for men than women, and had the effect of increasing the loss in wages and salaries."

Overall Averages of Labor Turnover

Available statistics on labor turnover also indicate that the net differences in job-leaving of men and women are generally small--even when considered on an overall basis.

A study (3) of job mobility by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that men tend to move from one job to another somewhat more often than women. According to that study, 11 percent of men workers but only 8.6 percent of women workers changed jobs one or more times in 1961. Also, job mobility was found to be higher among young workers than among mature ones. In the 20- to 24-year-old group, 24 percent of the men and 16 percent of the women had more than one job in 1961.

An indication of women's increasing stability in the work force is also revealed in the Department of Labor's study of the work life expectancy of women. This shows that the average number of years a woman works has more than tripled during the past 60 years and increased by almost one-third in the past decade (1950-60). Work life expectancy for those women born in 1900 averaged 6.3 years; in 1940, 12.1 years; in 1950, 15.2 years; and in 1960, 20.3 years. In each case, the percentage increase in women's average work life expectancy far exceeded that of their average life expectancy.

The Women's Bureau, in a special analysis (4) of labor turnover rates for factory workers, studied data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics during the period January 1950 to January 1955. The analysis for the total period revealed an average quit rate of 24 per 1,000 women employees as against 18 per 1,000 men employees. A comparison of these results with those of an earlier study shows that factory women became less inclined to quit their jobs than they formerly were. This is probably because the proportion of older women workers increased and women have become increasingly interested in continuous employment.

Studies of Comparable Characteristics

Several studies provide insight into the job stability of men and women by comparing those who hold similar jobs or have similar employment characteristics. These studies present a much more favorable picture of women's work life than frequently realized and support the contention that hiring decisions of employers are generally based on factors other than the relative labor costs of men and women.

In its study of the job tenure of American workers (5), the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that continuous employment in the current job as of January 1963 averaged 3 years for women and 5.7 years for men. In comparable age groups, job stability was as great for single women as for men. In fact, among those 45 years of age and over, single women averaged more time on the same job (14.2 years) than men (12.8 years).

The average job tenure of married women was generally shorter than that of single women in all age groups except the youngest (14-24 years). However, the average job duration of married women 45 years of age and over (6.4 years) was considerably higher than that of young workers. This group--young men as well as young women--had spent on the average less than 1 year on their current job.

A U.S. Civil Service Commission study (6) of sick leave records in 1961 showed relatively small difference in the average sick leave of men and women Federal workers: 7.9 days for men and 9.6 days for women. But even this difference narrowed in most instances when comparisons (7) were made of men and women with similar salaries, ages, or years of service. For example, in 1961 among those earning $9,000 to $10,000 a year, 6.3 days of sick leave was the annual average for men and 6.9 days for women.

The highest average numbers of sick days occurred among those in the lowest salary levels--the levels where women workers are concentrated. Two groups of women had less sick leave, on the average, than their male counterparts: those 60 years of age and over (10.5 days for women, 11 days for men) and those with over 30 years of Federal service (10.7 days for women and 11.3 days for men).

A study (8) made by the Civil Service Commission especially for the President's Commission on the Status of Women covered voluntary separations of full-time career employees between December 16, 1962, and February 2, 1963. On an overall basis, the relative separation (turnover) rate was about 2.5 times greater for women than men. The higher rate for women can be explained by the relatively larger proportion of women than men under 25 years of age, in lower grade clerical jobs, and with fewer years of Federal service--factors all associated with high turnover. When the data for men and for women were compared separately by age group, by broad occupational group, and by length of service, differences in their relative turnover rates decreased.

Detailed statistics of illness absenteeism were collected for the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the monthly survey of the labor force during the period July 1959 to June 1960. In an analysis (9) of selected occupational groups, industries, types of employment, and types of manufacturing for all employed civilian wage and salary workers in the Nation, average illness rates (when adjusted for age) were frequently higher for women than for men. In some instances, however, the reverse was true; for example, among clerical workers and government workers.

A private study (10) conducted among 65 large chemical and pharmaceutical laboratories revealed only moderate differences in the labor turnover of men and women chemists when they were grouped by type of degree required for the grade of work performed. A majority of the surveyed laboratories reported that in comparisons made on this basis, women's turnover rates were "about the same" as men's; no more than 10 percent of the laboratories reported them "much higher." The overall turnover rates were much less favorable for women than men "mainly because women are disproportionately represented at the lowest [degree] level, where turnover is highest for both sexes." It is significant that directors of many of the largest laboratories said that differentials in turnover were not sufficiently great to be a deciding factor in employment of women.

Unpublished statistics of the Department of Labor obtained in 1955 also provide pertinent comparisons of labor turnover rates. For both men and women workers, the lowest quit rates occurred among skilled workers and professional and managerial workers. On the other hand, again for both men and women, the highest quit rates occurred among sales, service, and unskilled workers. The fact that large numbers of women are in these latter groups and relatively few are in the skilled groups accounts to a large extent for the unfavorable generalizations about the labor turnover rates of women workers.

The age of workers and their length of service also are significant determinants of separations. Only small differences were found to exist in the rates of men and women 45 years of age and over, although younger women in some occupational groups had significantly higher separation rates than men. When the separation rates were analyzed in terms of seven broad occupational groups, the younger women in three groups were found to have lower quit rates on the average than their male counterparts. In three other occupational groups, the women's rates were higher; in the seventh group, the rates were the same for men and women. These variations underline the weaknesses inherent in generalizations about women's quit rates.

In each age group included in the Department of Labor data, the highest separation rates occurred among the men and women workers who had less than 1 year's service with the employing company. Thus, the fact that large numbers of women are employed on a part-time or intermittent basis sometimes results in the concentration of women in the group having higher turnover rates, and this makes the situation appear unfavorable for all women.

The importance of considering job levels and other factors in any study of absenteeism is further emphasized in an international report (11) on women industrial workers in Paris, France. The following quotation is from that report:

> "Detailed study of absentee figures for large numbers of employees of both sexes and at all levels of skill discloses that the comparatively high proportion of women at the lower levels of the occupational scale (even in countries where the employment of women is a long-standing tradition) goes a long way towards explaining their frequent irregularity at work. Highly trained women occupying responsible and skilled positions are seldom absent, even if they have several children to bring up."

Thus, meaningful comparisons of men and women in regard to absenteeism and labor turnover must take into consideration those working in comparable jobs. The critical generalities frequently voiced not only exaggerate overall differences but are often incorrect in terms of comparable groups of men and women.

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Revised August 1965